

Conference Abstract

The Lost Rhino

Suzanne Ryder[‡], Roberto Portela Miguez[‡]

[‡] The Natural History Museum, London, United Kingdom

Corresponding author: Suzanne Ryder (s.ryder@nhm.ac.uk)

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Abstract

In 2022, the Natural History Museum ([NHM](https://www.nhm.ac.uk)) London, opened a temporary art installation featuring a digitally reproduced, northern white rhino. [Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg](#), artist of The Lost Rhino—‘The Substitute,’ presented a life-size projection of a rhinoceros slowly transforming from a series of pixilated forms into a high-resolution reproduction of an adult northern white rhino, before disappearing completely (Fig. 1). The thought-provoking artwork questions our fascination with creating or recreating new life forms rather than conserving existing species.

Accompanying the digital centre piece were artifacts that presented different representations of a rhinoceros. One of the specimens exhibited alongside the artwork was a white rhino taxidermy specimen from the collections at the NHM. Displaying a specimen such as this, precipitates practical, ethical and security challenges to be overcome by the curatorial, conservation and exhibition teams before installation.

The specimen has a fascinating, if brutal and shocking story. It was shot by Sir Robert Thorene Corydon in Mashonaland (NE Zimbabwe). In 1892, Corydon accepted a commission from L.W. Rothschild to collect specimens of flora and fauna. He captured two white rhinoceroses and sent one to the British Museum (Natural History) in Kensington and the other to Rothschild's museum at [Tring](#). The account published by Coryndon (Coryndon 1894) is horrifying as it contains colonial and racist statements but holds parallels with the message Ginsberg is calling to attention. In the narrative, there is clear awareness of the impact poaching has on the population numbers of the white rhino and there is reference to their inevitable extinction but no question is raised that poaching should stop, to prevent the loss of this magnificent animal. Corydon's reasoning

being, that the 'natives' were going to continue to hunt and kill the rhino for meat and the value of the horn (Fig. 2). There was an acceptance that extinction was going to happen anyway. There is even mention that at least the colonial hunters were sending them to museums for research and display.



Figure 1.

Images of the art installation and promotional poster (The Substitute, 2019. Courtesy of the artist. © Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg Ltd).



Figure 2.

Artwork of *Rhinoceros simus* from Coryndon 1894. Plate XVIII

Ginsberg highlights the current groundbreaking conservation research surrounding the last surviving northern white rhino, where eggs and semen have been collected from the

last living members of this species in an effort to implant embryos into a closely related species (Busby 2022). This cutting-edge research has huge implications and ambitions to resurrect this and other extinct species. This is exciting, pioneering research but Ginsberg is asking the question, just because we could do this, should we? Perhaps, unlike the colonial hunters, we should stop and think?

This specimen highlights collaboration within the Museum to facilitate such an exhibition and the important messages art installations can provide within natural history museums. An art installation can be an interesting way to present nature, and the exhibition team works closely with the artist to ensure the concept is portrayed correctly and aligns with Museum values. Including related artifacts in an exhibition requires involvement of libraries, archives, researchers and of course the relevant curator. Once the scope is agreed, specimens and objects selected, conservators prepare the specimen for display. Movement of a specimen, such as a full-size adult rhino, is no small undertaking and requires assistance from engineers and a specialist team of movers to provide safe transportation. A bespoke, steel frame was constructed to allow the movement of this specimen around the site (Fig. 3). Once installation is complete, the exhibition benefits from a team to manage press coverage, advertising, and security to name a few considerations for a successful launch. A true team effort.

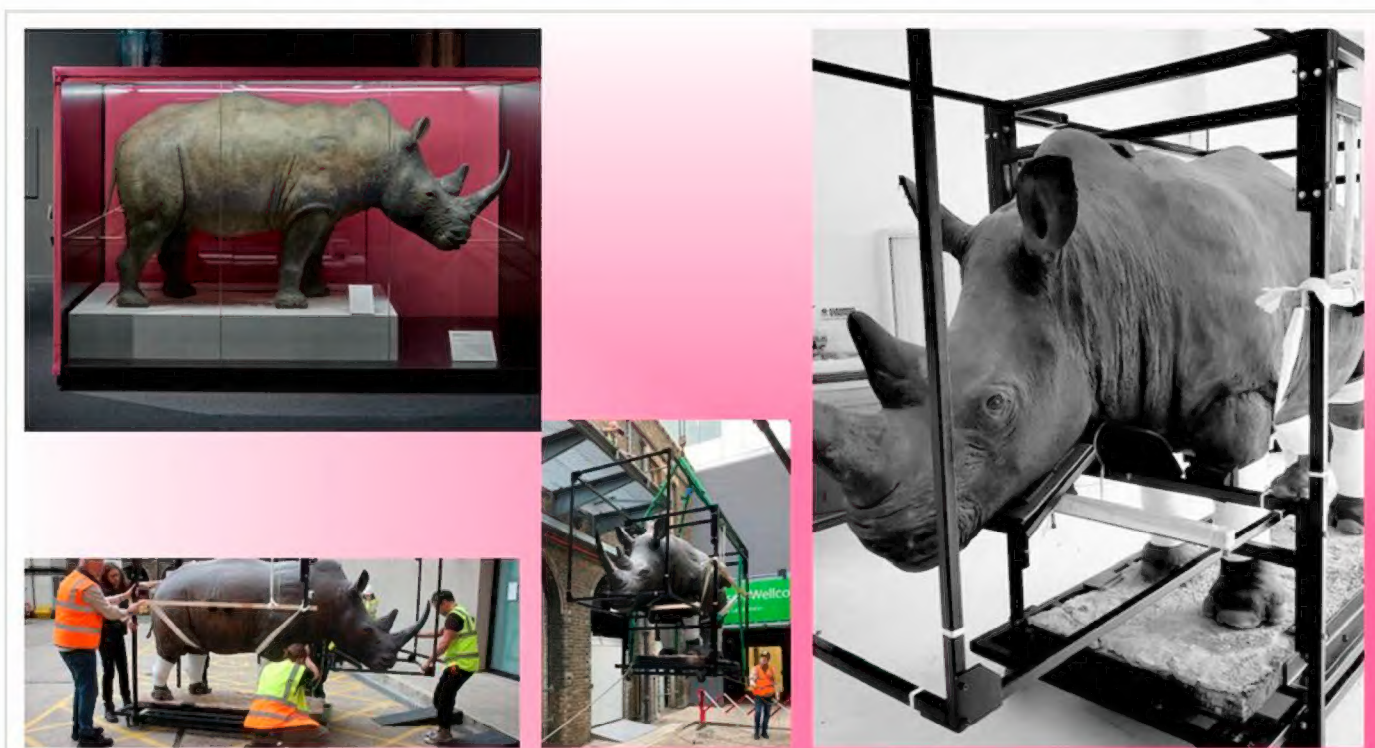


Figure 3.

Images showing members of staff working together to install the taxidermy specimen (© Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London).

A small part in this process and the reason this specimen is significant to me, the first author, is due to my role as Integrated Pest Management (IPM) coordinator. The NHM has had a comprehensive IPM programme for many years and one of the biggest achievements for the IPM group was securing funding and support for a state-of-the-art quarantine facility, opened in 2012 (Fig. 4). The IPM group worked with designers to make this bespoke space work for a multitude of users and objects. When deciding on

the size of the large walk-in freezer, we discussed what we would want to fit in the freezer. The Museum has approximately 80 million specimens of various shapes, sizes and weights and we wanted to accommodate as many as possible, without wasting space and energy. A giraffe was discussed but the actual number of instances we would need a freezer large enough to accommodate a giraffe would be minimal, so an alternative bespoke solution was sought. After considering several different animals, we agreed it should accommodate a taxidermy specimen of an adult rhino. As result of the exhibition, the freezer was actually used to treat an adult rhino! This was a great source of satisfaction. That said, since its construction, the facility has not been waiting idle for a rhino to treat—it is heavily used by the Museum and external parties. It has treated items from gorillas and rhinos to palatial carpets and furniture.

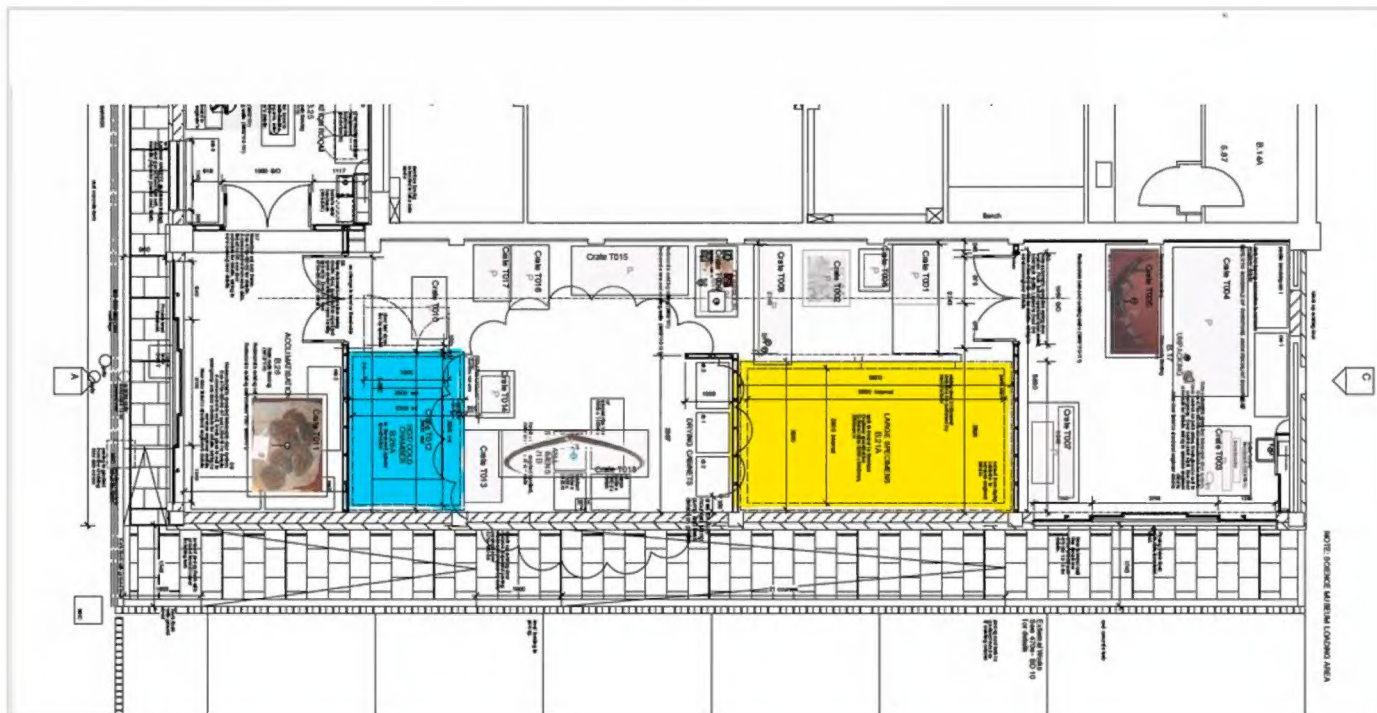


Figure 4.

Quarantine facility plan at the NHM, London (© Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London).

Keywords

Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg, quarantine facility, IPM, museum exhibit

Presenting author

Suzanne Ryder

Conflicts of interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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